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ABSTRACT

Before unconditionally supporting the development of closer community or the restoration of a public realm, communication scholars should further reflect on the historical uses and potential threats attendant to this task. A sense of nostalgia sometimes romanticizes the Greek "polis" while sidestepping the changes wrought by population growth and the development of the mass media. One sense of community takes the grammatical form of "the community of..." representing a homogeneous community. A community based on the principle of the common good considers its members to be entitled to have a say in whatever measures might affect them. Another version of community arises from the term's roots in commonality. Community can also serve as a means of self-identification on the basis of shared circumstances. An interpretation of community often tied to gender distinguishes between public and private issues. Community can represent a danger easily overlooked if unity is always treated as benign cooperation. Richard Sennett issued a warning about the dark side of community by recalling an often-repeated slogan of the Nazism: destructive "Volksgemeinschaft." The concept of community also creates problematic discursive arrangements. Membership in communities should be reconfigured to approximate what Ludwig Wittgenstein describes as family resemblances. Rhetorical scholarship needs to reveal the grounds of associative networks among communities, even if such a task must proceed without a definite blueprint that imposes a pattern that discursively forged alliances obey. (Contains 36 references.) (RS)

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From Community to Conformity

The concepts of communication and community seem to enjoy a close kinship. After all, whenever communication extends beyond introspection, some sort of public forum is presupposed. The art of public speaking evolved in the context of a *polis*, a forum wherein issues affecting the community could be examined and subjected to scrutiny. In this sense, community provides the environment for communication. The relationship between communication and community even extends to etymological similarity, with both terms derived from the Latin term for commonality or making common. As a result, communication and community develop connotations of mutual reinforcement. 'Community' reverberates with the notions of togetherness, cooperation, and friendship. 'Communication' resonates with noble overtones. One of the best selling public speaking textbooks points out this etymological similarity to show how "a vital sense of community" in introductory courses enacts a fundamental communicative principle (Osborn & Osborn, 1994, p. 6). Communication, however ill-defined, holds the key to solving conflict, and communication's status as a panacea spells high market value for scholars in the field.

Before we celebrate our value, raise our consulting fees, join hands and sing choruses of "We Are the World," we should reflect on the nature and senses of community. I seek to problematize the concept of community by showing how it is neither an unmitigated good nor a univocal concept. On the positive side, this critical examination offers a cautionary tale by elaborating how community can be transformed into conformity.

My exploration of community proceeds in two steps. First, I delineate several senses of community on the basis of the assumptions they contain about the nature of public discourse. This taxonomic task leads to caveats about invoking community. The caveats emerge by considering how community has been and can be used to galvanize audience support while blocking avenues for dissent.

Ideas of community often shade into ideals, especially when community is understood as univocally benevolent. The *sensus communis* associated with communication can be a presupposition of a public forum or the desired result of public discourse, a solidarity that rallies audiences in the absence of transhistorical ideals. This second sense of communicatively induced solidarity infuses the more recent work of Richard Rorty, who admonishes himself and other pragmatists for taking community "too seriously" (1991, p. 30). Rorty claims that an overemphasis on community breeds ethnocentrism, but he brushes aside its disadvantages. While Rorty sees ethnocentrism as the necessary corollary of delimiting the audience to whom one must justify claims, I see an insidious threat in community at all costs. Before tracing the history and potential of that threat, we should consider the connections between community and public.

Six Senses of Community

The term 'community' assumes significance only in light of who constitutes the social aggregate it designates. While notions of community have some tie to a group of individuals who share some common interests or characteristics, the idea of community remains ambiguous. This ambiguity arises from the term's employment in reference to the members of audiences, the *esprit de corps* that unifies audience members, the precondition for communication to occur, the result of communication that constitutes an

audience (Charland, 1987), and those who adhere to a shared set of values (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Certainly these examples do not exhaust the referential possibilities.

In every case, the concept of community depends on the construction or assumption of an audience, be that audience the precondition or the outcome of communication. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that probing the nature of community implicates the idea of what constitutes a public. The call to promote community—a cry that underlies this conference theme's subtext that communication *should* build community—accompanies laments about the vanishing public sphere. Let us take a closer look at the community that communication should build. Then we will consider whether and under what conditions community should be encouraged.

1. Community as Homogeneity

One sense of community takes the grammatical form of "the community of _____." The blank acts as a variable whose value is any set of observed or perceive qualities shared by all members of the group. A community fitting this description qualifies as a homogeneous community. Such homogeneity might be traced to substantive commonalities among all group members, such as red hair, a cleft chin, or the Islamic religion. Group homogeneity, however, can be more ambiguous. As Wittgenstein (1958) points out, a family need not share a single common characteristic to exhibit a resemblance. Instead, a community or family might be identifiable by crisscrossing and overlapping threads of commonality that, taken together unify the group. In Wittgenstein's sense of family resemblances, the homogeneous community has no single value that can be assigned to the blank in "the community of _____."

The *sensus communis* stems from a series of intersections among group members, not a single quality (or set of qualities) common to every member.

Most important, the homogeneous community sees itself as a unified bloc even its members disagree on almost every substantive issue. Members of a family might disagree about almost everything and bear little physical resemblance to each other. Nevertheless, a family reunion will bring together these disparate elements because participants share a common identity as "we Nixons," "we Thurmonds," etc. As Sister Sledge sang, "We are family," presumably because family members define themselves as a unified group despite individual differences. Of course, family ties do not corner the market of homogeneity. Believers in astrology, for example, presume that others who share their sign also share certain essential features that infuse all those born under that sign.

Whether conceived as a shared essence, family resemblances, or the tendency to react as a unified whole, the homogeneous community defines itself in terms of the identity shared by its members. Even if that identity has ambiguous grounds, it nonetheless characterizes individuals within the community under the umbrella of the community. The homogeneous community may be conceptualized in terms of "us _____." Of course, an "us" implies a "them," and this opposition with its implications occupies a later section.

2. Common Good and Communal Concerns

Taking measures to assure the common good plays a central role in American history. A notion that the American colonies should cooperate to provide for the common good helped to solidify their collective identity as a nation instead of as thirteen independent states. The preamble to the Constitution includes the "common defense" as a component of the "more perfect union" embodied in the document. For John Dewey (1927/1954), the public consisted of everyone who might be influenced by the consequences of an issue being considered. In the language of value theory, a public in a given case consists of the stakeholders. A community based on the principle of the common good, therefore, would take measures "for the public welfare," considering its members entitled to have a say in whatever measures might affect them. Accounting for the common good prevents those who initiate ideas and policies from monopolizing how they will be implemented.

A group of people becomes a community only as its shared values become articulated. Dewey expresses his disappointment that better means of transportation and communication have created a Great Society, "but it is no community" (1927/1954, p. 98). A community emerges only when shared concerns generate the need for collective action. Lloyd Bitzer (1978), asking how communities arise and are sustained, identifies the central role of communication in forging the bonds among members of a collectivity. Bitzer envisions the use of rhetoric to educate a "universal public" that could tap into ongoing cultural traditions as a source of wisdom to resolve disputes (1978, p. 91). The repository of inherited public knowledge contained in literary, poetic, philosophical, and other cultural heritage provides the equipment for restoring community on a grand scale.

In this way, Dewey's goal of a "Great Community" possible only through communication would become a reality (1927/1954, p. 142).

The transformation of society into community through cultural tradition raises important questions. Must the community reproduce its inherited traditions? How does a community call into question oppressive practices that have been institutionalized? As Castoriadis (1991) points out in his criticism of Habermas, communication might be necessary to establish ties between members of a community, but it hardly suffices to ground a social order. The scheme of communal development needs to include an explanation of how social institutions structure the bounds of community and how communally authorized ideas and practices become susceptible to criticism. As will become apparent, the idea of a single public presents its own difficulties.

3. Communal Access

Another version of community arises from the term's roots in commonality. "Community access" channels on cable television get their name from their openness, the idea being that communal property be usable by everyone in the community. The role of community as common ground in the sense of public parks or public property counters claims that particular sources of knowledge be authoritative. The resultant "open society" constitutes a community united not by any positive, essential nature but by shared methods of testing knowledge claims and resistance to privileged access to truth (Popper, 1966).

Communal accessibility most closely approaches the idea of "common sense," but with a twist. Common sense does not refer to an identifiable body of shared doctrines, but to characteristic ways of approaching issues and problems. When members of a

community employ common sense, they sense their commonality because their orientations to and definitions of the subject at hand arise from (but are not limited to) traditions authorized by—but not necessarily indigenous to—that community (Popper, 1985, p. 54). In this incarnation, tradition enables inquiry without binding to it tradition. While traditionalism circumscribes the bounds of inquiry by tying it to previous knowledge, common sense in a less restrictive community uses tradition as a starting point for how the collectivity might define, investigate, and react to specific situations.

Common access, however, always has its restrictive side as long as it falls short of universality. Pleas to recover public participation in decision-making treat the definitions of communities as unproblematic. Far from entering the scene as a unified whole, publics (note the plural) introduce a variety of concerns and agendas. While fragmentation of communities introduces its own array of problems (such as how communal bonds are reforged in light of how events affect the populace), the central question is: Why does expanding the scope of community improve the quality of knowledge and decisions?

If broader communal access is laudable, then does expansion of public participation in decision-making always accrue benefits? Surprisingly few theorists have considered the problems attendant to unlimited expansion of public forums. In the desire to reject elitism, researchers seem eager to embrace all means to democratize knowledge. The rejection of elitism often takes the form of decrying over-reliance on expertise, with science playing the fall guy (Lyotard, 1984; Zarefsky, 1994). Even with universal access, however, should decision-making always proceed according to the "one person, one vote" principle? While reification of technical expertise does have its dangers, too hasty a retreat from it also has consequences. In the absence of consensus, the broader the

participatory base in decision-making, the more likely that competing viewpoints will have to be reconciled. Defining a problem "as fundamentally technical, managerial, or administrative—rather than public—does narrow the range of people deemed capable of addressing it," and thereby it "weakens the power of the public sphere" (Zarefsky, 1994, p. 10). The power of the public sphere, however, need not be equal in all phases of epistemology and decision-making. Public access re-enters the picture as audiences beyond the original investigators appropriate an issue and shape it to fit communal needs, customs, and understanding. Public concerns might play a smaller role once an issue is defined as falling in the province of experts, but that designation by no means grants the experts a monopoly on how knowledge will be altered, interpreted, and used by the stakeholders. For example, the realm of sociobiology originally was confined to a small cadre of entomologists, but a communal side surfaced with a vengeance when E. O. Wilson's theories were popularized in non-scientific forums (Lyne & Howe, 1990).

A prudent way to reintroduce community into technical issues would be to reaffirm that communities beyond the designated experts play some role in the production, diffusion, and appropriation of knowledge claims. This recognition of community falls far short of a demand for public participation in every aspect of investigation and implementation. The power of community does not diminish as issues become more technical; it simply shift to different arenas. Walter Lippmann (1927/1993) realized that a public does not constitute a constant factor in all affairs, just as formal logic does not monopolize all intellectual operations. Funding of research, for example, often depends on legislators adapting to the support their constituents express for a particular type of project. In this way, communal concerns affect the research agenda. A

reassertion of community influence occurs at the level of accountability, when experts must answer for their decisions. The reinsertion of public interests at the point of implementation acts as a check on policies that might have been formulated without considering the stakeholders (Lippmann, 1927/1993). The influence of community wanes primarily when members of the community fail to take advantage of the potential they have to affect technical decisions. In fact, the representative form of American government presumes that communal involvement should not be unrestricted. An important part of a community's role consists of deciding when to relegate duties (such as scientific investigation) to parties outside that community.

4. Common Circumstances

Community can serve as a means of self-identification on the basis of shared circumstances, the sense that membership develops from "being in the same boat." The development of communal identity among the American colonists provides an excellent example. Although colonial Americans originally conceived of themselves as British subjects, their self-designation gradually transformed into members of a new nation independent of British rule. This shared identity as Americans outweighed the differences between immigrants to the New World, especially as England emerged as an enemy to all the colonists' interests. Regardless of one's individual agenda, the Revolutionary War drew widespread support among the colonists because philosophical issues such as taxation without representation highlighted what seemed to be the universal oppression of Americans per se (Lancaster, 1985).

The community generated by common circumstances is more tenuous than that connected with homogeneity. While the homogeneous community identifies its bonds as

the product of a shared essence or nature, shared circumstances are more ephemeral because they stem from specific incidents or historical situations. Circumstances might establish firm ties among members of a community. Accidental circumstances can indeed create a sense of unity as strong as or stronger than natural affections. The main difference lies in duration of the communal alliance. A group that claims a shared essence or nature remains a community until its members change their identity by redefining themselves. The cohesiveness resulting from circumstances can dissolve whenever the circumstances change. The particularity of circumstances allows members of a community to recognize the contingency and potential fragility of their unity. On the other hand, an essence or nature has the force of a condition into which individual enter, usually involuntarily. Although he was Jewish, Otto Weininger (1906) wrote an anti-Semitic psychological tract so virulent that he has earned the dubious honor of being identified as a precursor of Nazism. Since Weininger himself identified Judaism as an unchangeable "psychological constitution" (1906, p. 303), a Jew had to accept the consequences of such a nature. Weininger chose to escape his identity as a member of the Jewish community. He committed suicide.

5. Public and Private Issues

An interpretation of community often tied to gender distinguishes between public and private issues. In this context, a community acts as a forum within which only topics authorized by members of the forum can arise. This version of public authorization qualifies as an ideological permutation of the communal authorization discussed by Bitzer (1978). According to Bitzer (1978, pp. 75-76), two conditions entitle members of a community to authorize discourse as public: they are stakeholders in the matter being

discussed and they are competent to render decisions. The specification of competency invites two difficulties, one logical and one ideological. The logical challenge enters into a vicious infinite regress. Who determines the competency of those who authorize public discourse? Either the authorizing body certifies itself as competent and thereby has no claim to representing the interests of the community as a whole, or it gains its certification from elsewhere. If certification comes from elsewhere, then the power of authorization must be granted from some other source that wields authority, which gains its authority from another source, et cetera ad infinitum. The only way to halt the infinite regress would be to designate a source of authorization as carrying supreme authority. This designation of an ultimate authority could authorize tyranny instead of public discourse, especially when an authorizing agent treats itself as the source or voice of that supreme power.

The challenge to an authorizing community shades into ideological concerns at this point. Precisely the tyrannical overtones of ultimate power to authorize fuel Lyotard's proclamation that postmodernism "wage a war on totality" (1984, p. 82) so that access to knowledge and power be more democratized. If a community authorizes what constitutes legitimate public discourse, then its decisions also involve justifying restrictions that disqualify some matters from public deliberation. Patriarchal communities traditionally have invoked the communal equivalent of the reserved powers stipulation of the tenth amendment: issues not authorized for public discussion are relegated to residual status, designated as "private," and classified as falling into the province of the "feminine." On a more general level, the power to authorize carries with it the power to restrict, and justifying discursive or other restrictions in the name of the

community as a whole quells dissent. As long as the interests of the community as a whole outweigh those of individuals, opposition to communally authorized practices and institutions gains legitimacy only when the authorizing powers are exposed as not acting for the sake of the community.

6. 'The' Public Forum

The authorizing function of community can proceed via consensus or by the exercise of power that reinforces the legitimacy of the parties who render judgment. Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt to establish a basis for communal action that would circumvent coercion or violence. Habermas tries to lay the foundation for consensual agreement in the grounds for communicative action. The basic assumptions that enable communication to occur include sociological and pragmatic rules (e.g., Gricean maxims) as well as moral commitments that facilitate discourse (e.g., the Kantian assumption that interlocutors are not pathological liars, since otherwise mutual mistrust would stymie communication).

Communal decision-making would strive for a rational consensus in a forum that neutralizes relations of power. Such an ideal speech situation reintroduces community as a remedy for ideology, the systematic distortion of communication into a means to sustain dominance of particular interests. Habermas's idea of community counteracts what he sees as the transformation of a critical space into a place for the propagation of bourgeois ideology (1989). The public that emerges from Habermas's system, however, glosses over the possibility that communities might balkanize into ever smaller, more restrictive collectivities to solidify their hold on power. Habermas seems to assume what

could be impossible, in the sense of unthinkable and not just infeasible. The public forum he envisions presumes that members of a community can voluntarily call into question and depart from their social institutions and construct a community without their previous political institutions (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 79).

Paradoxically, an idealized public forum such as that proposed by Habermas might institutionalize an exclusionary concept of community. All participants in a community of Habermas's variety must have internalized universal pragmatics, agree to abide by discursive rules binding on all parties, and share values that regulate discursive and ethical action (Aronowitz, 1993, pp. 90-91). Central to a peaceful, rational public sphere is the restriction of access to that sphere. Only people who "have undergone the rigorous training of scientific and cultural intellectuals" can qualify as members of the discursive community (Aronowitz, 1993, pp. 90-91). Any concept of community is restrictive insofar as it implies qualifications for membership. Even the most public discussions in the United States exclude illegal aliens, felons, the mentally incompetent, and children. Ideas of a public seem to demand contextualization because they arise in response to concrete historical situations (Warner, 1993). A single, all-inclusive public sphere—even as an ideal—risks institutionalizing the political commitments underlying the version of the public being proposed. In other words, Habermas might be universalizing liberalism (Fraser, 1993, p. 7).

The Other Side of Community

One recent praise of community deserves special attention, since it was presented by David Zarefsky in his 1993 address as President of the Speech Communication Association. Zarefsky (1993) recommends reconstituting a sense of community for the

sake of reviving a public forum. He laments that "communal decisions have devolved to individuals, been delegated to experts, or simply deferred" (1993, p. 10). The culprit Zarefsky identifies in the shift away from communal decision-making is postmodernism, less a doctrine than a critical attitude that distrusts any explanatory schemas that purport to transcend historical, social, or (in some versions) individual contingencies and idiosyncrasies.

Zarefsky claims: "Disconnecting the people from the process of collective decision making is an invitation to tyranny" (1993, p. 12). Unfortunately, tyranny often arrives uninvited. Restrictive communities can arise under the guise of inclusiveness. While Zarefsky notes, "'The public' implies people" (1993, p. 9), appeals to popular sentiment tend to attach a definite article to the populace: "*the* people." Once *a* people assumes a definite identity, *the* people search for and create ways of specifying and sustaining their uniqueness. This specification occurred in the context of Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (McGuire, 1976). Fichte's claim that Germans were unique *qua* Germans set the stage for how Germans would trace their development and chart their future course both as a particular people and as a nation. It later became apparent that race would provide the answer.

Community can represent a danger easily overlooked if unity is always treated as benign cooperation. The German term *Gemeinschaft*, usually translated as 'community', has a root that is associated with commonality. Restoring this sense of commonality helps explain the connection between goodwill and the *polis*. Plato was fond of saying that "friends should have all things in common" (1953, 279c). The commonality Plato alluded to may be interpreted two ways. If members of a *polis* locate their common bond

outside themselves, then their affinity has an external focus. Externalizing the source of community permits recognizing common causes that can draw uniform responses based on shared values, beliefs, and traditions. A second interpretation, compatible with the first, acknowledges common causes in a different sense. While objects of communal concern can be independent of the community itself, the responses are uniform because of a shared essence that defines the community. The more stable the community, the more embedded and unalterable the source of community must be. The second explanation of commonality treats the "things in common" as internal to the members of the *polis*, part of their constitution.

When the source of community becomes completely internalized, it can function as a global explanatory principle. A dangerous argumentative immunity develops. Since the nature of the community is a unique and unalterable trait of that community, criticism of the community's values or practices can be discounted as "alien" or insensitive to the unique nature of the community. Precisely this argumentative insularity characterized Nazi discourse regarding science.

Richard Sennett (1977) issues a warning about a dark side of community by recalling an often-repeated slogan of Nazism: destructive *Volksgemeinschaft*. As the identity of a community becomes more clearly defined, the criteria for membership in the community solidify. Firmly established communities can evolve (or devolve) into rigidly exclusive clubs as much concerned with restricting entry as with enriching the bonds among members. Put in terms more akin to the philosophy of science, destructive *Volksgemeinschaft* preoccupies members of a community with demarcation issues. Differentiating insiders from outsiders assumes paramount importance, and this

differentiation itself can become a means for sustaining communal identity. Far from addressing issues that might improve the lot of the community, destructive *Volksgemeinschaft* concentrates on ever stricter and finer membership qualifications. The focus on keeping outsiders way provides a handy weapon against dissent, since a community must unify as a whole to ward off the threats from aliens.

A narrowly defined concept of community also can be used to restrict the domain of social benefits. Demanding that science in the Nazi regime offer "service to the community," Reichsdozentführer Schultze explained that the relationship between science and society was reciprocal (Das Wesen, 1939, p. 7). Science could serve the community only "if the entire nation is united by means of a common *Weltanschauung*" (Das Wesen, 1939, p. 7). Science itself, however, contributed to sense of commonality because the harvest of scientific benefits should be reaped only by the community that generated the research. The use of community to restrict the applicability of scientific findings did not exhaust the limitations imposed by narrowly circumscribing communal membership. Nazi publications treated scientific research as a political activity. In passages that bear striking resemblance to *Weltanschauung* philosophies of science, writers emphasized how science was a "cultural creation" (Erzeugungsschlacht, 1935, n. pag.). Unlike *Weltanschauung* philosophies, however, the Nazi definition of cultural rootedness lay in "the basis of racial membership" upon which "[e]very scientific view is formed" (Erzeugungsschlacht, 1935, n. pag.).

As Nazi insistence on the particularity of community became more emphatic, science was subjected to restriction on two fronts. The contraction of science occurred at the level of inquiry because the problems that stimulated research had to arise from the

concerns of the racially defined community. Far from addressing universal problems or even problems that extended beyond the bounds of the national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*], scientific inquiry was "bound to the conditions and limits" imposed by the racially homogeneous collectivity (Lebendige, 1936, p. 3). On the level of application, the fruits of scientific research were not universal either. Since the racial essence of the community was the springboard for scientific inquiry, the benefits of research should accrue only to those who shared that essence. Far from encouraging universality, community restricted both the range of acceptable research questions and the applicability of findings.

At this point, an objection might arise. Perhaps the ills of insular communities stem from their failure to be genuine communities sustained by the free exchange of ideas. My reply is that no component of communities per se prevents them from solidifying into restrictive, competitive monads that purport to be universal. In fact, the notion of a community where differences are leveled easily devolved into a postured universality where the appearance of communal action masks autocracy or domination by particular interests. The goal of human community has its laudable aspects, even if it remains unachieved or unachievable. Like any transcendent ideal, however, it offers ready ideological fodder. Individual autonomy often has been sacrificed at the altar of communal interest. All too often, cries of community have rallied people to answer calls of particular interests posing as *the* common cause.

The concept of community also creates problematic discursive arrangements. If several communities exist, then how can they communicate with one another? This question exposes a prominent weakness of *Weltanschauung* philosophies of science. If

some operation akin to translation occurs among communities (Kuhn, 1970), then:

> (1) distortion or omission is almost guaranteed since translation does not involve one-to-one transference of meanings, and
>
> (2) the relationship among communities becomes problematic, especially if they tackle the same issue, so
>
> (3) differences among communities can easily give way to establishing hierarchies among them.

The scenario of communities competing for tiers on hierarchies undermines the idea of community founded on equality.

A singular community, however, falls prey to other shortcomings. Multiple communities at least offer a check on each other, although at the cost of territoriality. The standard definition of totalitarianism explains that political system as an erosion of distinctions between public and private. A totalitarian state renders public as many facets of human life as possible. Resistance to the governing regime is possible only to the extent that one might reclaim as one's own some of the private realm usurped by the state. Hermann Göring succinctly explained the principle of totalitarianism: "Our lives are our own no longer, we have no private life, but that does not matter. We are Germany, and you are Germany, and all that is the only thing for which we would all give our lives" (1939, p. 138). The priority of public concerns over private life justified state encroachment on privacy. Nazi policies that today seem invasive were justified by pointing out that the separation between public and private was an antiquated concept of

liberalism; all service was public service (Proctor, 1988; Bendersky, 1985; Mosse, 1966). Clearly the expansion of a public realm cannot qualify as an unmitigated good.

Modest Proposals for Further Research

A solution to oppressive communities might lie in more flexible criteria for membership in any given community. The Nazi definition of *Volksgemeinschaft* rested on what amounts to several mistaken assumptions, ones certainly not unique to National Socialism. Locating the source of community in a collective essence such as race or blood presumes that communal identity must:

(1) be based on a single explanatory principle,

(2) maintain this basis,

(3) preserve the impermeability of its boundaries.

Aside from the political expediency of the foregoing provisos, why are they necessary? The answer is that they are logically dispensable and perhaps should be abolished on moral grounds. Take personal identity as an example. Is there any reason why I should doubt my identity because my appearance, memories, and personality change over time? The fundamental issue amounts to whether the basis of communal bonds weakens if their source has less of an a priori foundation. Blood is thicker than water, but beware lest the lifeblood of community clot. Castoriadis traces the emergence of political autonomy to the ancient Greek capacity for self-reflection that questioned political institutions. Such questioning poses a challenge to reified communal standards of correctness, reminding members of the polity that political institutions "are human creations and not 'God-given' or 'nature-given'" (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 38). Contingent communities can teach the valuable lesson of tolerance while avoiding unquestioning allegiance.

I propose that membership in communities be reconfigured to approximate what Wittgenstein (1958) describes as family resemblances. Instead of assuming that a single, unalterable essence is responsible for communal identity, a shifting tapestry of shared concerns and qualities could constitute a *polis*. Such an orientation leaves open the possibility for a priori communal bonds, but it does not enshrine them as unalterable and impermeable. The stability of language encourages reification of nouns as actual entities, especially in the case of Nazi elevations of "blood" to a mystical essence whose transmission to the next generation was a "religious duty" (Darré, 1942, p. 21). As a corrective, communal identity might be regarded in terms more friendly to Heraclitus, who recognized that a river can maintain its identity even if the drops of water comprising it change.

Applied to American cultural diversity, a family resemblance version of community helps resolve the conflict between a melting pot that boils away individuality and balkanization that paralyzes cooperative action. Postmodern theorists quickly point out that justice relies on balancing the needs and interests of different communities, not subsuming them under the rubric of a universal, singular community (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1985). Allowing communities to participate in formulating communal policy restores contingency to community, highlighting the rhetorical give-and-take that makes communal practices human creations. Rather than a goal of an ideal condition, community should serve as a reminder that people with all their fallibility structure what counts as public. A revival of community calls for multiplying the paths of interaction among communities, not restricting commonality to a single course all must tread. A

healthy sense of community searches less for a shared essence that unites its members than for the possible paths of convergence and cooperation.

Some steps have been taken in this direction. Mapping the alliances among scientific communities, Bruno Latour discusses how scientists align with each other and with political forces to establish "lines of force" (1988, p. 171). Latour suggests a fruitful line of inquiry for tracing how communities develop. Research should concentrate on how parity, dominance, and divergence among communities are forged. The problem with sociological investigations is that they chronicle the alignment of communities without revealing the strategies and tactics behind these configurations. "It is as if we spoke of road networks but never of civil engineering" (Latour, 1988, p. 170). Rhetorical scholarship needs to reveal the grounds of associative networks among communities, even if such a task must proceed without a definite blueprint that imposes a pattern that discursively forged alliances obey.

Another productive direction has been taken by Nancy Fraser, who proposes "subaltern counterpublics" as an alternative to "a single, comprehensive, overarching public sphere" (1993, p. 14). Fraser, responding to Habermas's efforts to reconstruct a public realm, suggests that the elitist and repressive potential of *the* public sphere be replaced with several smaller communities. These communities offer sites where members can establish social bonds, thus fulfilling the public's unifying function. Simultaneously, subaltern counterpublics provide sites of resistance to efforts that level differences between communities, thus preserving the public's function as a check on tyranny. Fraser's fruitful suggestion shows how any attempt to reformulate community should take into account its threats as well as its blessings.

Conclusion

The thrust of this essay has been to sound a warning to prevent overly hasty endorsements of community. A sense of nostalgia sometimes infuses reflections about community. Perhaps a strong desire persists to return to the life of the *polis*, where issues of mutual concern were debated rationally in front of interested and competent audiences. But that nostalgic wish probably romanticizes the Greek *polis* while sidestepping the changes wrought by population growth and the development of the mass media. More modestly, the vision of a generic Cheers bar, "where everybody knows your name," would satisfy the desire for individual recognition. The stakes of creating or restoring community, however, go far beyond personal recognition.

I have cautioned that community, while often desirable, is subject to abuse and appropriation to justify and strengthen relations of power. Before unconditionally supporting the development of closer community or the restoration of a public realm, the historical uses and potential threats attendant to this task deserve further reflection.

Unclear domain of community. Why is a more expansive communal domain inherently better than a more restricted domain? How should communities be circumscribed?

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